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Shifting terminology and confusing representations

An examination of intellectual disability terminology in Dutch newspapers from 1950 to 2020

Terminologie changeante et représentations confuses: une analyse de la terminologie du handicap intellectuel dans les journaux néerlandais de 1950 à 2020

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Abstracts

English Français

In order to gain a better understanding of the debates surrounding language preferences, the shifts in intellectual disability terminology in Dutch newspapers were analysed. Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, this study examined newspaper articles between 1950 and 2020. The results indicated shifts in intellectual disability terminology in newspapers in the direction of organisations of people with disabilities, scholars', and the government's preferred terminology. The use of outmoded terms such as "feeble-minded" and "mongol" decreased. However, newspapers continued to use outdated and pejorative terminology and traditional narratives. Intellectual disability terminology, particularly the terms "idiot" and "backward," is frequently employed in non-disability-related contexts to emphasise negative viewpoints. Consequently, newspaper readers are confronted with a confusing array of terms associated with disparate representations of people with intellectual disabilities, ranging from antiquated and negative to positive and inclusive.

L'évolution de la terminologie relative au handicap intellectuel a été examinée pour comprendre les débats sur les préférences linguistiques. Les articles de journaux néerlandais publiés entre 1950 et 2020 et contenant des termes relatifs au handicap intellectuel ont été analysés à l'aide d'une analyse de contenu quantitative et qualitative. Les résultats ont montré que la terminologie liée au handicap intellectuel a changé dans la presse en faveur de celle adoptée par les organisations de personnes handicapées, les universitaires et le gouvernement. L'utilisation de termes comme "faible d'esprit" ou "mongolien" est en recul. Cependant, les journaux ont continué d'utiliser certaines expressions dépassées et péjoratives. Dans des situations sans rapport avec la déficience, les termes liés au handicap intellectuel – en particulier les termes "idiot" et "retardé" – sont fréquemment utilisés pour renforcer une opinion négative. Les lecteurs de journaux néerlandais sont donc confrontés à une multitude déroutante de termes liés à des représentations disparates des personnes handicapées, qu'ils soient désuets et négatifs, ou positifs et inclusifs.



Index terms

Mots-clés : Pays-Bas, handicap intellectuel, langage, terminologie, représentation, journaux

Keywords: The Netherlands, Intellectual Disability, Language, Terminology, Disability Representation, Newspapers

Author's notes

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Full text

Introduction

- 1 There is an ongoing debate about what appropriate disability terminology should be (e.g., Alemany, 2021; Halmari, 2011; Jernigan, 1993; Reid, 1997). To understand this debate, it is crucial to know which terminology was commonly used in the past and whether the renewal of terminology has resulted in the elimination of derogatory and outmoded terms and their associated representations. Opinions regarding the appropriateness of intellectual disability terminology have shifted, partly because of new definitions (e.g., Luckasson et al., 2002; Schalock et al., 2007) and the fight against disability-related stigma (e.g., Ford, Acosta & Sutcliffe, 2013). Nevertheless, not all disability scholars support these language modifications (e.g., Botha, Hanlon & Williams, 2021; Gernsbacher, 2017; Vivanti, 2019). This study examines the shifts in intellectual disability terminology in Dutch newspapers over a prolonged time period.

Background

- 2 As early as 1974, Wolfensberger emphasised the need for appropriate terminology devoid of negative value judgements for people with intellectual disabilities (Wolfensberger & Kurz, 1974). Oliver (1994) stated that terminology use is a choice. It is a matter of decency and respect to use the terminology that people prefer.

[...] calling someone a “retardate” or “a schizophrenic” makes it easier for us as a society to lock them up, drug them into insensibility, electrocute or even kill them. It is not quite so easy to do these things to a survivor of the mental health system or a person with a learning difficulty. (Oliver, 1994: 5)

Terminological preferences

- 3 There are four main reasons cited in the literature for the need for a change in terminology: (1) The impact on public perceptions and social acceptability (e.g., Feldman et al., 2002; Millington & Leierer, 1996; Titchkosky, 2001; Zola, 1993). (2) The effect on the self-image of people with intellectual disabilities and their parents (e.g., Zhang & Haller, 2013). (3) Negative experiences of individuals with disabilities because of offensive terminology (e.g., Titchkosky, 2005). (4) Implications for diagnostics and, consequently, for support and care (e.g., McDonald, Gollogly & Mackay, 1987). These reasons are used as arguments for or against various terms in terminology debates.
- 4 However, there are divergent opinions in the terminology debate. Some argue that the impact of terminology on representations is limited (e.g., Granata & Lane, 2023).

Others state that new terms will gradually acquire negative connotations (Tassé & Mehling, 2018).

- 5 Organisations of people with disabilities (DPOs) value precise, careful, terminology. The primary recommendations for terminology revisions are to put people first, avoid using outmoded terms or words with negative connotations, and inquire how an individual prefers to be referred to or addressed (e.g., Mencap, 2021; ARC, 2019). Nonetheless, some people with disabilities do not favour person-first language (Oliver, 1990). They contend that “a person with a disability” defines what they have, whereas “a disabled person” tells who they are (e.g., Bury et al., 2020; Titchkosky, 2001). Furthermore, according to Gernsbacher (2017), person-first language may even stigmatise rather than destigmatise.

Dutch terminology debates

Box 1: Societal changes in the Netherlands

- Between 1945 and 1965, social legislation and new institutions were developed. Parents and relatives of people with intellectual disabilities established DPOs. The medical approach to disability predominated.
- In the 1970s and 1980s, new rules and regulations made it possible to construct small facilities in residential areas. Focus on the community integration of people with disabilities.
- Since 1990, Dutch policy has become more individualistic and neoliberal, with austerity on the one hand and equal rights and responsibilities for people with disabilities on the other. Individuals' capabilities should outweigh their limitations. A DPO of individuals with intellectual disabilities was established.
- In 2002, the American Association on Mental Retardation published its new functional and contextual classification and definition of mental retardation (Luckasson et al., 2002). The shifting perspectives of Dutch service providers and DPOs reflected this position.

Note. Societal changes as described by Brants, Van Trigt & Schippers (2018), and Canon Gehandicaptenzorg (2015).

- 6 Dutch DPOs of people with intellectual disabilities actively advocated for the use of terminology that they deemed appropriate from roughly 1990 to 2010. This was primarily accomplished by persistent lobbying of the Dutch government (e.g., Tweede Kamer, 1991; Vliegenthart, 2001). For instance, DPO director Wijnbeek (1990) advocated for the term “people with (intellectual) disabilities.” He argued that the terms “feeble-minded” and “mentally retarded” did not imply referring to individuals with capacities. State Secretary Vliegenthart (2001) stated that the government was considerate of DPOs and their members' feelings. She could imagine the terms “idiots” and “imbeciles” being offensive, she answered to parliamentary questions. In addition, DPOs challenged journalists to reconsider their language usage (De Graaf, 1994; Ter Haar, 1991; Ter Haar & De Kruiff, 1997). Moreover, Dutch health scholars emphasised the need for updated terminology to enhance diagnostic processes and the associated care, counselling, and support (e.g., Van Tellingen & Van Midde, 1990; Kraijer, 1993). Special educators Van Tellingen and Van Midde (1990) argued that jargon should be revised. The combination of “feeble” and “minded” suggests that these people are inferior by definition. The term “intellectual disabilities,” however, refers to fellow humans with cognitive skills-related developmental disabilities. In contrast, psychologist Kraijer (1993) still preferred the terms “retarded” and “mental handicap.” He argued that the term “people with intellectual disabilities” does not imply that a person is both intellectually and socially disabled. Since roughly 2010, it does not appear that DPOs, government officials, and scholars have divergent terminology preferences. In the Netherlands, the phrase “persons with disabilities” is now used whenever possible (Van Rijn & Timmermans, 2014). In inclusive language guides, disability-specific terminology is highlighted (e.g., Samuel, 2021; WOMEN Inc., 2020). This points to the existence of three distinct periods in the Dutch terminology debate. Between 1950 and 1990, no specific actions were taken. Between 1990 and 2010, DPOs,

scholars, and the government participated in terminology discussions. Between 2010 and 2020, consensus existed within the intellectual disability sector regarding preferred terminology.

Terminology research

- 7 Numerous studies have examined the media's use of disability terminology (e.g., Briant, Watson & Philo, 2013; Scholz, 2010; Zhang & Haller, 2013). Once common terms such as "mongol" and "retard" have been replaced by "Down syndrome" and "intellectual disability," respectively. The use of person-first language has increased. However, despite truly outmoded terms becoming less common, journalists continued to employ medical jargon and outdated and derogatory terms (e.g., Andrews, Powell & Ayers, 2022; Devotta, Wilton & Yiannakoulias, 2013; Haller, Dorries & Rahn, 2006; Wall, 2007; Wilkinson & McGill, 2009).
- 8 In the early 1990s, John Clogston (1994) and Beth Haller (Haller, 1995b) introduced a binary classification to classify newspaper representations of people with disabilities: traditional and progressive representations. In this study, we use the more neutral term "contemporary" to Clogston-Haller's "progressive" label. The classification has been extensively used (e.g., Burns, 2010; Burns & Haller, 2015; Ciot & Van Hove, 2010; Devotta, Wilton & Yiannakoulias, 2013; Goethals et al., 2020; Jones, 2014; Scholz, 2010; Wall, 2007; Zhang & Haller, 2013). It can be used to illustrate the narrative context in which particular terms are employed. Traditional categories characterise individuals with disabilities as defective and attribute their disability-related impairments to the person (Haller, 1995b). For instance, the medical narrative describes an individual in need of medical treatment or care, whereas the social pathology narrative depicts them as clients who are economically dependent on the government or society (Clogston, 1994). Contemporary categories represent individuals as disabled by society, not by physical characteristics (Haller, 1995b). Contemporary narratives characterise disabilities as society's inability to adjust its physical, social, and occupational environments. People with disabilities are portrayed as members of a politically disadvantaged minority in the minority/civil rights narrative, for instance. The disabled community actively advocates for reform (Clogston, 1994). In general, traditional narratives were dominant (e.g., Burns 2010, 2011; Burns & Haller, 2015; Haller et al., 2012), despite signs that the proportion of contemporary narratives increased (Devotta, Wilton & Yiannakoulias, 2013). "Medical" and "social pathological" narratives dominated traditional articles, whereas "minority/civil rights" narratives dominated contemporary articles (e.g., Burns, 2011; Burns & Haller, 2015; Haller et al., 2012).
- 9 There has been ample research on the representation of people with disabilities, including examinations of narratives and terminology employed by the media when reporting on people with disabilities (e.g., Briant, Watson & Philo, 2013; Devotta, Wilton & Yiannakoulias, 2013; Scholz, 2010; Wilkinson & McGill, 2009; Zhang & Haller, 2013). Nonetheless, several crucial aspects remain absent. (1) The majority of studies did focus on disabilities in general, and (2) they were mainly conducted in English-speaking countries (e.g., Burns, 2010; Carter, Parmenter & Watters, 1996; Dajani, 2001; Haller, 1999). (3) The studies were limited to a single newspaper (e.g., Green & Tanner, 2009; Wilkinson & McGill, 2009) or to a brief period of time (e.g., Burns, 2010; Carter, Parmenter & Watters, 1996; Dajani, 2001; Devotta, Wilton & Yiannakoulias, 2013; Haller, 1995a; McAndrew, Carroll & O'Malley-Keighran, 2020). Twenty years is the longest period within which researchers have studied newspaper terminology (Bonnstetter, 1986; Wilkinson & McGill, 2009). (4) Most terminology research was restricted to terms that refer to individuals or groups of individuals with disabilities (e.g., Burns, 2010; Scholz, 2010). Names of institutions and medical conditions, as well as non-disability-related uses, were excluded.

- 10 Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the shifts in intellectual disability terminology in Dutch newspapers between 1950 and 2020.

Methods

Study design

- 11 Through summative qualitative and quantitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of articles published in Dutch newspapers, changes in the use of intellectual disability terms and the connotation and narratives in which these terms were used were analysed.

Methodology

Sources and databases

- 12 Six national Dutch newspapers that represent the diversity of the Dutch news media were selected. *De Volkskrant* and *Het Parool* are leftist newspapers. *NRC Handelsblad* (today *NRC*; previously *Algemeen Handelsblad*) is a liberal newspaper. *De Telegraaf* is a popular and conservative newspaper. *Trouw* and *Nederlands Dagblad* (previously *Gereformeerd Gezinsblad*) have a religious background. These newspapers were selected because they are accessible online. The year 1950 was chosen as the starting point for the newspaper analysis because Dutch newspapers prior to 1950 were limited in size and primarily comprised of brief news items.
- 13 Relevant articles were retrieved from two online databases in February 2021. The freely accessible database Delpher (www.delpher.nl) contains digitised Dutch newspapers, books, and magazines. The availability of newspapers ran until 1995. LexisNexis (www.lexisnexis.nl) is a commercial provider of information solutions. The digitised newspapers in the LexisNexis database run from 1995.

Search strategy

- 14 I. *Counting terminology, each year from 1950 to 2020.* A keyword search strategy was conducted to provide an overview of the frequency of intellectual disability terminology usage. The search terms were common Dutch terms for people with intellectual disabilities. The first author compiled the list of search terms, while the second and third authors completed it. Among the list sources were current guidelines from English-language intellectual disability organisations (e.g., ARC, 2019; Mencap, 2021), as well as Dutch terminology guidelines (e.g., Samuel, 2021; Ter Haar, 1991; Ter Haar & De Kruiff, 1997; WOMEN Inc., 2020). To determine the frequency of occurrences, separate searches were conducted using the Delpher and LexisNexis search engines:
- A. *Diagnostic label.* Articles with the terms “feeble-minded,” “mental,” and “intellectual.”
 - B. *Nature of condition.* Articles with the terms “handicap” and “disability.”
 - C. *Level of condition (IQ).* Articles with the terms “idiot,” “imbecile,” and “moron.”
- 15 The following criteria were met by the included articles: (a) they were published between January 1 1950 and December 31 2020; (b) they used at least one of the above-

mentioned relevant terms, or derivations thereof, such as “idiots,” “people with intellectual disabilities,” or “mentally handicapped persons”; (c) they were newspaper articles (e.g., news, features, columns, opinions, or serials). Commercial and personal ads were excluded.

16 If a single article contained two distinct terms, it would be counted twice. If the same term appeared twice in a single article, the article was counted once. Frequencies were imported into an Excel file.

17 II. *Content analysis*. It was necessary to limit the number of articles to be analysed in order to answer the research question. Articles included satisfied the following criteria: (a) they were published in the first week of each quarter of 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, or 2020; (b) they contained at least one Dutch term for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The first author compiled the list of search terms, while the second and third authors added to it. Due to the manual examination of the articles, the terms “Down” and “mongol” were able to be included. Articles containing terms outside the study’s scope, such as “Downing Street,” “down under,” and “Mongols” as Mongolians, could be excluded; (c) the terms appeared in all sections of the newspaper, excluding advertisements.

Analysis

18 I. *Counting terminology each year in 1950-2020*. The annual frequency of articles containing one of the included search terms was determined and analysed.

19 II. *Content analysis*. Before coding the selected articles for content analysis, the first author assembled a content coding framework. After discussing the research methodology and preliminary results, the three authors refined the coding framework. The first author manually encoded the articles. When ambiguity arose, the second author was consulted. Recorded variables were: year of publication; article type (article, column, opinion, agenda, comic, serial, and letter to editor); and terminology.

20 Based on the distinct terminology discussion periods previously identified, we used three periods in the analysis: period 1 = 1950, 1960, 1970, and 1980; period 2 = 1990 and 2000; and period 3 = 2010 and 2020.

21 Disability terminology can be used to refer to disabilities, but there is also a non-disability-related use. Therefore, three categories of articles were defined: 1) articles containing disability-related terms (i.e., terms directly referring to intellectual disabilities: people with intellectual disabilities, descriptions of the disability, or names of policies, services, and organisations); 2) articles containing non-disability-related terms (as in “backward culture,” “idiotic party,” or swear words); and 3) non-classifiable use (i.e., the term is named in a crossword puzzle).

22 The representation evoked through intellectual disability terminology was analysed by examining its connotation and narrative usage. Connotations may be negative, positive, or neutral. Articles were coded as negative if terms were consciously used in a negative way, as in insults, swear words, unfavourable metaphors, or descriptions of undesirable situations. Terms that were not intended to be negative were coded as “positive or neutral.” To code the narrative usage, articles were coded according to the categories developed by Clogston and Haller (Clogston, 1994; Haller, 1995b). To classify these categories, we employed the terms “traditional” and “contemporary” narratives.

23 The above-mentioned terminology guidelines recommend using person-first language and avoiding outmoded scientific or diagnostic terminology; consequently, the following categories were assigned to the terms:

- A. *Person-first language*. 1) person-first/people-first, 2) identity-first/disability-first, 3) disability-alone, and 4) terms not referring to (groups of) *people* with intellectual disabilities.
- B. *Diagnostic label*. 1) feeble-minded, 2) mental, 3) intellectual, 4) cerebral, 5) cognitive, and 6) other.

- C. *Nature of condition.* 1) handicap, 2) disability, 3) constraint, 4) retardation, 5) faculties, 6) immaturity, and 7) other.
- D. *Level of condition (IQ).* 1) idiot, 2) imbecile, 3) moron, and 4) other.
- E. *Down syndrome.* 1) mongol, 2) Down syndrome, and 3) other.
- F. *Description of condition.* 1) backward, 2) retarded, 3) simpleminded, 4) poor in spirit, and 5) other.
- G. *Connotation.* 1) terms that are intentionally used negatively (e.g., as an insult); and 2) terms that are not intended to be negative (positive or neutral).
- H. *Narratives.* (A) terms used in traditional narratives (disabilities are dysfunctional and/or attributed to the individual): 1) medical narratives: they are nothing more than care-dependent individuals; 2) social pathological narrative: receiving care and support is a gift, not a right; 3) supercrip narrative: fascinating and inspiring because of their disability; 4) business narrative: costly for society and businesses; (B) terms used in contemporary narratives (disabilities are related to attitudes or to society's inability to adapt): 5) minority/civil rights narrative: fighting for civil rights; 6) legal narrative: having legal rights; 7) cultural pluralism narrative: multifaceted beings; and 8) consumer narrative: contributing to the welfare of society, businesses, or individuals.

24 To compare the usage of terms during the three study periods, frequencies were imported into an Excel file. Using SPSS 28, Chi-square tests of independence and Fisher exact tests were employed. If the expected frequency of the use of terms was less than five, the Fisher exact test was applied instead of the Chi-square test.

Rigor

25 We adhere to Morse's (2015) criteria for conducting rigorous qualitative research: Concerning validity, we collected data from six distinct newspapers over an extended period. We combined quantitative content analysis of every newspaper published during that time period with qualitative content analysis of a sample of selected articles. Concerning reliability, an audit trail was maintained throughout the data analysis process to document the steps and decisions made, allowing us to consistently follow our research procedures. The research procedures and findings were discussed with the second and third authors and six disability research and disability policy development specialists. Concerning generalizability, we provided an explanation of the sampling strategy. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge their professional roles, with the first author having worked as a programme manager for multiple non-governmental disability organisations and the second and third authors teaching university-level disability studies. Although nondisabled, the first author grew up with (concealed) psychiatric issues in his family. The second author has significant functional and speech limitations due to cerebral palsy, and the third author is the parent of a child with a disability.

Results

Counting annual intellectual disability terminology

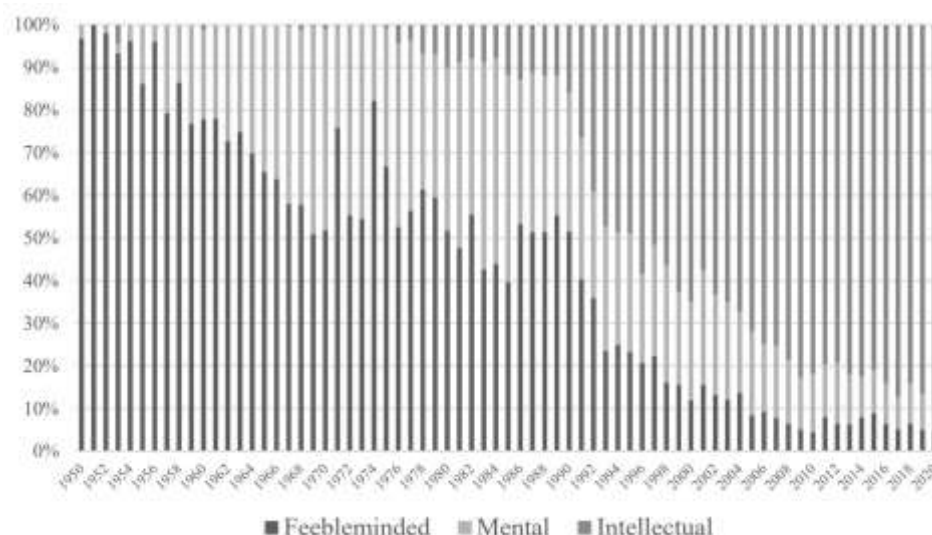
26 The searches for articles returned at least 116,016 results containing at least one of the keywords listed above. Due to search engine limitations, it was not possible to conduct a single search using all keywords, making it impossible to determine the precise number of unique articles. An article containing three different unique terms would appear in three separate searches, whereas an article containing the same term

three times would appear in a single search. For example, an article containing the phrase “intellectual disability” (intellectual + disability) would be counted twice.

Diagnostic label

We discovered 31,958 references to articles containing the terms “feebleminded,” “mental,” “intellectual,” or derivations thereof.

Figure 1: Percentages of articles with “feebleminded,” “mental,” or “intellectual”

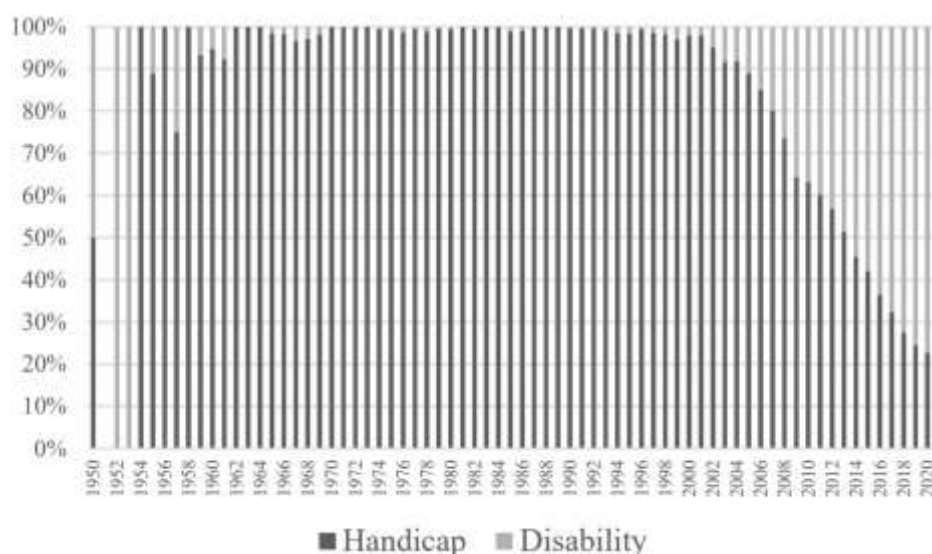


- 27 Figure 1 indicates that the usage of the term “feebleminded” diminished between 1950 and 2020. After 1975, the term “intellectual” was observed to be gaining popularity, and by 2020, it had achieved dominance. After 1990, the usage of the term “mentally” (such as “mentally deficient” and “mentally handicapped”) declined.

Nature of condition

- 28 We discovered 21,633 newspaper articles containing the terms “handicap,” “disability,” or their derivatives between 1950 and 2020.

Figure 2: Percentages of articles with “handicap” or “disability”

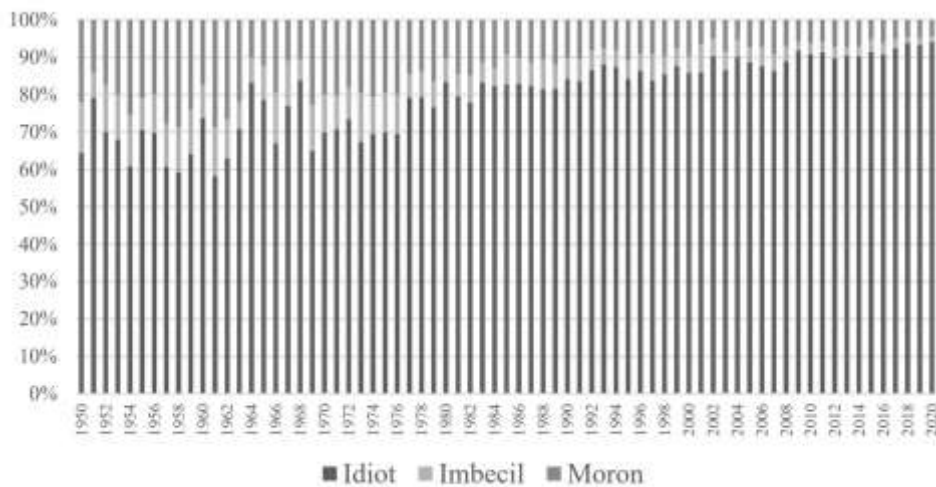


- 29 Figure 2 indicates that the term “handicap” (such as “intellectual handicap” or “mentally handicapped”) has decreased since 2010. Since 2000, the use of the term “disability” has increased, and 2015 was the first year in which it surpassed “handicap” in usage.

Level of condition (IQ)

30 We found 42,060 references to newspaper articles containing the terms “idiot,” “imbecile,” “moron,” or derivations thereof.

Figure 3: Percentages of articles with “idiot,” “imbecile,” or “moron”



31 Figure 3 demonstrates that the percentage of articles containing the term “idiot” has increased substantially. The terms “imbecile” and “moron” have been used in a relatively consistent manner throughout the years.

Content analysis

32 For the content analysis, intellectual disability terms were searched for in articles from the selected three periods (covering 224 days in 8 separate years). This produced 668 unique articles that included at least one of the keywords. We distinguished articles using disability-related terminology from those using non-disability-related terminology. Of the 229 articles using disability-related terminology, 49 were published in the first period (1950, 1960, 1970, 1980), 69 in the subsequent period (1990, 2000), and 111 in the final period (2010, 2020).

33 Most of these articles were news or feature pieces (179). 20 pieces (columns, letters to editors) expressed opinions, and 27 were agenda items. Two articles were serials.

Table 1: Number of articles with disability-related terms in selected periods

		Dutch	1950, 1960 1970, 1980		1990, 2000		2010, 2023		Total	
			Article count	Valid perc.	Article count	Valid perc.	Article count	Valid perc.	Article count	Valid perc.
Unique articles			49		69		111		229	
Person-first language [†]	Person-first		6	12%	11	15%	51	49%	68	30%
	Identity-first		24	49%	38	51%	23	22%	85	37%
	Disability-alone		19	39%	25	34%	30	29%	74	33%
	Articles without these terms		6		8		15		29	
	Total		55	100%	80	100%	119	100%	256	100%
Diagnostic label [†]	Feeble-minded	zwakzinnig	11	39%	12	25%	1	1%	24	16%
	Mental	geestelijk	14	50%	14	29%	10	14%	38	26%
	Intellectual	verstandelijk	3	11%	20	42%	58	82%	81	55%
	Cerebral	mentaal	0	0%	2	4%	1	1%	3	2%
	Cognitive	cognitief	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%	1	1%
	Articles without these terms		24		24		40		88	
	Total		52	100%	72	100%	111	100%	235	100%
Description of condition	Retarded	zwakbegaafd	3	6%	8	12%	10	9%	21	9%
	Articles without "retarded"		46	94%	61	88%	101	91%	208	91%
	Total		49	100%	69	100%	111	100%	229	100%
	Backward	achterlijk	5	10%	8	12%	0	0%	13	6%
	Articles without "backward"		44	90%	61	88%	111	100%	216	94%
	Total		49	100%	69	100%	111	100%	229	100%
Nature of condition [†]	Handicap	handicap	12	67%	32	94%	34	47%	78	62%
	Disability	beperking	0	0%	0	0%	39	53%	39	31%
	Faculties	vermogens	6	33%	2	6%	0	0%	8	6%
	Articles without these terms		33		36		43		112	
	Total		51	100%	70	100%	116	100%	237	100%
Down syndrome [†]	Mongol	mongool	4	100%	7	64%	1	3%	12	26%
	Down	Down	0	0%	4	36%	32	97%	36	77%
	Articles without these terms		45		60		79		184	
	Total		49	100%	71	100%	112	100%	231	100%
Level of condition (IQ) [†]	Idiot	idiot	6	12%	1	1%	5	4%	12	5%
	Imbecile	imbeciel	2	4%	0	0%	0	0%	2	1%
	Moron	debiel	10	20%	3	4%	3	3%	16	7%
	Articles without these terms		31	63%	65	94%	104	93%	200	87%
	Total		49	100%	69	100%	112	100%	230	100%

[†] Articles may contain multiples terms.

Person-first language

34 As depicted in Table 1, 68 articles published during the selected time periods utilised person-first terminology, 85 articles utilised identity-first terminology, and 74 articles utilised disability-only terminology. The use of person-first language has increased over time ($X^2(4, N = 227) = 36.54, p < .001$). After 2000, person-first terms became the most common.

Diagnostic label

35 As depicted in Table 1, newspapers used the term “intellectual” (81) more than “feeble-minded” (24) or “mental” (38). The infrequently employed terms “cerebral” (3) and “cognitive” (1) were not included in the analysis. The use of “intellectual” increased

over time ($X^2(4, N = 143) = 51.31, p < .001$). Till the 1990s, the most common terms used were “feeble-minded” and “mental.”

Description of condition

- 36 The term “retarded” was used in 21 newspaper articles, while the term “backward” was used in 13 articles (Table 1). The obsolete expressions “simple-minded” (1) and “poor in spirit” (1) were not included in the analysis. The use of the terms “retarded” and “backward” remained stable over time.

Nature of condition

- 37 As depicted in Table 1, newspapers used the term “handicap” (78) more than “disability” (39). The infrequently employed juridical term “faculties” (8) was not included in the analysis. The number of articles containing the term “handicap” declined after 2000 ($p < .001$; Fisher exact test, periods 1950-1980 and 1990-2000 combined). Prior to 2010, the term “disability” did not appear in the selected articles.

Down syndrome

- 38 A total of 48 articles contained the terms “mongol” (12) and “Down” (36) (Table 1). All terms pertaining to Down syndrome, not just references to individuals with Down syndrome, were included (such as “downies” or the titles of television series such as “Down the Road”). Terms referring to the inhabitants of Mongolia were excluded. A significant relationship could be established between the period and the number of articles containing the terms “mongol” and “Down” ($p > .001$; Fisher exact test, periods 1950-1980 and 1990-2000 combined). After 1980, the use of the term “mongol” decreased. The term “Down” was not used prior to 1990.

Level of condition (IQ)

- 39 As depicted in Table 1, newspapers used the term “imbecile” (2) less than “idiot” (12) or “moron” (16). Although the usage of the idiot-imbecile-moron terminology has declined ($X^2(2, N = 230) = 30.88, p < .001$), there was no significant relationship between the period and any of the three terms.

Table 2: Number of articles with disability-related representations in selected periods

		1950, 1960, 1970, 1980		1990, 2000		2010, 2020		Total	
		Article count	Valid perc.	Article count	Valid perc.	Article count	Valid perc.	Article count	Valid perc.
Connotation	Unique articles	49		69		111		229	
	Terms used with positive or neutral connotation	34	70%	62	90%	105	95%	202	88%
	Terms used with negative connotation	15	30%	7	10%	6	5%	28	12%
	Total	49	100%	69	100%	111	100%	229	100%
Narrative ¹	Medical narrative	32	60%	41	56%	40	35%	113	47%
	Social pathology narrative	7	13%	0	0%	7	6%	14	6%
	Supercrip narrative	1	2%	7	10%	23	20%	31	13%
	Business narrative	2	4%	4	5%	10	9%	16	7%
	Minority/civil rights narrative	0	0%	1	1%	1	1%	2	1%
	Legal narrative	3	6%	2	3%	4	4%	9	4%
	Cultural pluralism narrative	8	15%	14	19%	24	21%	46	19%
	Consumer narrative	0	0%	4	5%	5	4%	9	4%
	Total	53	100%	73	100%	114	100%	240	100%

¹ Articles may contain terms utilised in multiples narratives.

Connotation

- 40 The usage of terminology with negative connotations declined ($X^2(2, N = 229) = 20.52, p < .001$ (Table 2)). In nearly 90% (202 out of 229) of the articles, disability-related terms were used with a positive connotation. The exception was the term “backward.” In seven out of thirteen articles, this term was used negatively ($X^2(1, N = 229) = 22.24, p < .001$).

Narratives

- 41 Traditional narratives were employed in 73% of the articles. Table 2 depicts specific shifts in narrative theme usage over time. The use of the medical narrative decreased, while the use of the super crip narratives increased ($X^2(8, N = 240) = 22.57, p < .01$ (Table 2, other traditional narratives combined (social pathology, business) and other contemporary narratives combined (minority/civil rights, legal, and consumer)).

Table 3: Number of articles with disability-related terms and narratives

		Medical narrative		Super crip narrative		Other traditional narratives		Cultural pluralism narrative		Other contemporary narratives		Total	
		Art. count	Valid Perc.	Art. count	Valid Perc.	Art. count	Valid Perc.	Art. count	Valid Perc.	Art. count	Valid Perc.	Art. count	Valid Perc.
Person- first language ¹	Articles	113		31		30		46		20		240	
	Person-first	16	16%	12	44%	9	30%	21	40%	11	44%	69	29%
	Identity-first	52	52%	6	22%	6	20%	20	38%	3	12%	87	37%
	Disability-alone	32	32%	9	33%	15	50%	11	21%	11	44%	78	33%
	Articles without these terms	16		11		3		1		0		31	
	Total	116	100%	38	100%	33	100%	53	100%	25	100%	265	100%

¹ Articles may contain multiples terms utilised in multiple narratives.

- 42 Person-first terminology was more prevalent in articles using cultural-pluralistic and super-crip narratives; identity-first terminology was more prevalent in articles using

medical narratives, whereas disability-alone was more prevalent in other traditional narratives ($X^2(8, N = 234) = 32.02, p < .0001$, Table 3).

Table 4: Number of articles and disability-related references

		Disability-related references		Non-disability-related references		Total	
		Article count	Valid perc.	Article count	Valid perc.	Article count	Valid perc.
Description of condition	Articles ¹	229		439		668	
	Retarded	21	9%	1	0%	22	3%
	Articles without "retarded"	208	91%	438	98%	646	97%
	Total	229	100%	439	100%	668	100%
Description of condition	Backward	13	6%	128	29%	141	21%
	Articles without "backward"	216	94%	311	71%	527	79%
	Total	229	100%	439	100%	668	100%
Level of condition (IQ) ²	Idiot	11	38%	281	89%	292	85%
	Imbecile	2	7%	15	5%	17	5%
	Moron	16	55%	20	6%	36	10%
	Articles without these terms	200		130		330	
	Total	229	100%	446	100%	675	100%
Connotation	Positive or neutral connotation	201	88%	18	4%	219	33%
	Negative connotation	28	12%	421	96%	449	67%
	Total	229	100%	439	100%	668	100%
Articles type ³	Articles (news, feature)	179	78%	281	64%	460	69%
	Opinion	20	9%	85	19%	105	16%
	Agenda	27	12%	55	13%	82	12%
	Other (e.g., poem, strip, serial)	3	1%	18	4%	21	3%
	Total	229	100%	439	100%	668	100%

¹ Six articles contained both disability-related and non disability-related terms.

² Articles may contain multiples terms.

³ Three crossword puzzle terms were non-classifiable.

Use of non-disability-related terminology

43 In the majority (439) of the 668 articles containing disability terminology, terms were used in a non-disability-related way. The relationship between periods and articles with disability-related and non-disability-related terms is significant ($X^2(2, N = 668) = 10.01, p < .01$; five articles contained both disability-related and non-disability-related terms). The use of non-disability-related terminology has decreased since 1990.

44 Specifically, the terms "backward" and "idiot" were used unrelated to disabilities. More than 93% of the 439 non-disability-related articles contained one of these two terms. "Idiot" appeared in 281 articles, while "backward" appeared in 128 (Table 4).

45 As depicted in Table 4, connotation and the use of intellectual disability terminology are related ($X^2(1, N = 668) = 478.14, p < .001$). Non-disability-related terms with a negative connotation were used more frequently. Also significant was the relationship between article type and intellectual disability terminology ($X^2(3, N = 668) = 18.99, p < .001$ (Table 4)). Although non-disability-related terminology appeared in all article types, it was most prevalent in opinion and issue pieces and serials.

Discussion

46 The present study showed consistent shifts in the use of intellectual disability terminology in Dutch newspapers over seven decades. In accordance with the preferences of Dutch DPOs, the use of outmoded derogatory terminology has generally decreased over the years. In the last two decades, newspapers have used the term “people with intellectual disabilities” more often than terms such as “feeble-minded” or “mentally handicapped.” Identity-first and disability-alone phrases have been used less frequently since 2000. The classification of “idiot,” “imbecile,” or “moron” is employed less frequently. Moreover, the term “mongol” is currently rarely used; newspapers tend to use the term “Down syndrome.” However, the use of outmoded and negative terms, such as “idiot” and “backward,” continued. These expressions were used with negative connotations, especially in articles that reflected particular points of view and were not related to disabilities or to people with intellectual disabilities. In addition, changes in terminology corresponded with the representation of people with intellectual disabilities. Increased use of person-first terms appeared more frequently in articles with contemporary narratives emphasising the multifaceted nature of people with intellectual disabilities.

47 Because our research spanned seven decades, we were able to determine if terminology shifts in Dutch newspapers paralleled the societal changes outlined by Brants, Van Trigt & Schippers (2018) and the Canon Gehandicaptenzorg (2015) (see Box 1).

- In the period of construction from 1945 to 1965, deeds were more important than words. No modifications to newspaper terminology.
- In the 1970s and 1980s, the stigmatising aspect of language was highlighted by the social integration of people with intellectual disabilities. The terms “retarded” and “mental” lost credibility. Newspapers have used the term “intellectual” since 1990.
- Since 1990, newspapers’ language has become increasingly person-first, reflecting the individualistic citizenship perspective.
- In 2002, following the publication of the AAMR’s influential functional and contextual definition, the term “disability” began to appear in Dutch newspapers, while “handicap” fell out of favour. People with intellectual disabilities were portrayed as fascinating and inspiring.

48 This terminology timeline suggests that multiple factors may explain the shifts in Dutch intellectual disability terminology.

49 The first factor is the stance of Dutch DPOs and intellectual disability scholars on terminology. In contrast to the United States, for example, intellectual disability organisations in the Netherlands did not engage in overt and legal terminology campaigns. They largely avoided a public debate, opting instead for a behind-the-scenes lobbying strategy (e.g., Wijnbeek, 1990). The activism of American advocates for disability rights has resulted in at least two substantial modifications to formal terminology (Fleischer & Zames, 2011). Official US-government documents were mandated to use person-first language in 1990 (Haller, Dorries & Rahn, 2006), and the phrase “mentally retarded” was replaced by “intellectual disability” 20 years later (Ford, Acosta & Sutclijfe, 2013). Even though newspaper language usage in a number of European countries appears to have changed between 1990 and 2000, the contexts vary. According to Lindberg and Bagga-Gupta (2021), Swedish newspapers appear to readily adopt new terms. They are receptive to the identity-formation processes of marginalised groups. Ciot and Van Hove (2010) contend that Romanian newspapers are searching for the proper terminology for disability because there is no Romanian equivalent. Professional terminology changed in Norway (Bachke, 2012), partially at the request of people with disabilities but also to avoid stigmatisation and in response to the changing terminology in newspapers. The Dutch DPOs’ active soft lobbying strategy appeared to be effective as well. The Dutch government made explicit reference to the

desires of people with disabilities when adapting formal terminologies (e.g., Tweede Kamer, 1991; Van Rijn & Timmermans, 2014; Vliegthart, 2001).

50 A second factor is the confusing use of Dutch intellectual disability terminology. Until the 1970s, the IQ cut-off point for mild intellectual disabilities was 80. Nowadays, people with an IQ score between 70 and 85 are referred to as “retarded,” whereas those with an IQ below 70 are referred to as “intellectually disabled.” Nevertheless, people with a substantiated indication can still use services for people with intellectual disabilities (Verstegen & Moonen, 2010). The explanatory memorandum to the Dutch Act approving the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is another instance of confusing terminology (Van Rijn & Timmermans, 2014). In the official translation of the UNCRPD, “persons with disabilities” is rendered as “persons with disabilities” and “impairment” as “disability.” The memorandum explains, however, that the term “persons with disabilities” will be used in references to Dutch policy or law, as preferred by Dutch DPOs. Actually, there is no Dutch language equivalent for “disability.”

51 The preferences and selections of journalists and editors constitute the third factor. Newspaper terminology did evolve over the years. However, this is not because journalists and editors believe it is their responsibility to improve disability representation (Jones, 2014) or because they adhere to terminology guidelines (Burns, 2010). Even if journalists are aware of these guidelines, they claim their influence is limited. As professionals, they decide for themselves what and how to write (Burns, 2011). Burns (2010) observed that the stench of supposed “political correctness” surrounding terminology guidelines could be detrimental. He stated that journalists are aware of the prevalence of traditional narratives and stereotypical representations of people with disabilities. They believe that using these narratives would garner greater reader interest and be better received. Briant, Watson & Philo (2013) demonstrated that the financial crises of 2007-2008 affected media coverage of disability in the United Kingdom. There was an increase in the number of articles combining a focus on disability benefit fraud with the use of derogatory disability terminology.

52 In their evaluation of the Dutch “Foul word” campaign, Böhm and Hogenhorst (1994) observed a change in terminology following the campaign. The Dutch journalists interviewed argued that this was not due to the campaign. Instead, they consider the practicality of terminology, the language used in daily life, and the terms employed by those with whom they communicate (Böhm & Hogenhorst, 1994). In other words, journalists and editors select terms whose meaning and connotation are assumed to be well-known to their audience. If the meaning or connotation of a term changes, or if new terms are required to explain new developments, newspapers will adapt their language.

53 We could demonstrate that journalists and editors use intellectual disability terminology in two distinct ways. The primary approach is to refer to the individual with an intellectual disability or to the condition of intellectual disability. On the one hand, an increase in preferred terminology was observed; on the other hand, in over 70% of the Dutch articles, traditional narratives were used. Dutch newspapers appear eager to adjust their language to what is currently acceptable but keep employing traditional representations despite this. The second approach is the ableist, non-disability related use of intellectual disability terminology. Ableist language assumes that people with disabilities are inferior to nondisabled people. In this approach, the presumptive negative aspects of intellectual disability are used to emphasise particular points of view. Especially the terms “idiot” and “backward” were frequently employed, as in TV titles like “Idiots on the Road” and political statements like “backward religions.” This contamination of terminology can be observed in the Netherlands with regard to all disabilities, diseases, and disorders (Ruetten, 2018). According to Siperstein, Pociask and Collins (2010), “retard” has become a common slang term in the United States. They warn of the marginalisation of people with intellectual disabilities that results from the stigma associated with the use of these terms.

Strength and limitations

- 54 This study's strength is that it examines terminology over an extended period. This allowed for the identification of lasting terminology changes over time. The inclusion of all uses of intellectual disability terminology, including organisation names, medical terms, and non-disability-related uses, is another strength of this study. This provided us with a greater understanding of the terms encountered by readers than studies that analysed only "proper" references to individuals with intellectual disabilities (e.g., Burns, 2010; Scholz, 2010).
- 55 In translating words from Dutch newspapers into this English-language article, we encountered translation problems, especially with the older terms. Moreover, there is sometimes a difference between the meaning and connotation of words in everyday language, such as in newspapers, and the formal language used in policy documents, diagnostic reports, or scientific articles. In our translation, we chose to follow everyday language. A complicating factor was that British and American terminology differed. We used British terminology where there were differences. Moreover, our content analysis was limited to intellectual disability terminology. We did not examine stigmatising medical terminology, including "patient," "victim," or "sufferer" (Haller, Dorries & Rahn, 2006).
- 56 The Clogston-Haller categories were initially developed to map news articles about people with physical disabilities. They have been useful in demonstrating that representations of people with intellectual disabilities have changed. However, the original categories required redefinition, and in accordance with Wall (2007), it was discovered that certain narratives were rarely employed. There is a need for further research into the representation of people with intellectual disabilities to determine whether or not the eight narratives should be supplemented by additional narratives (Ciot & Van Hove, 2010; Goethals et al., 2020).
- 57 An additional limitation of this study is that we only analysed printed newspapers. Other sources, such as television (e.g., Burns, 2010; Haller, 1999), and social media, were not examined. Unlike newspapers, these media have not existed continuously from 1950 to 2020. Additionally, the Royal Library scanned the paper newspapers in Delpher and made them searchable via Optical Character Recognition (OCR). Because the scanned images were not always clear, the OCR process produced illegible words on occasion. We do not know the accuracy of the Delpher OCR data; consequently, we were unable to estimate the number of words that did not appear in our searches (Council, 2018).

Further research

- 58 This study's findings demonstrate persistent changes in terminology that are associated with shifting perspectives on the position of people with intellectual disabilities in society as an example for disability terminology in general. The changes reflect the preferences of DPOs. However, people with disabilities' voices were largely absent. How do they experience terminology shifts? Which terminology do they favour, and why? Not only are the terminology experiences and preferences of individuals with disabilities largely unexplored, but other aspects of experienced disability representation remain largely unexamined as well. Insights from these experiences could improve the UNCRPD-required representation strategies of both governments and DPOs: "States' parties should take measures to combat stereotypes, prejudices, and harmful practises relating to persons with disabilities" (United Nations, 2006, article 8).

Conclusion

It can be concluded that in Dutch newspapers over the period 1950-2020, shifts in intellectual disability terminology in newspaper articles occurred. There was an increase in the preferred terminology of DPOs, scholars, and the government. However, the use of outmoded and negative terms and traditional narratives in newspapers continued until today. The terminology shifts in the Netherlands validate international research findings. A new finding is the frequent usage of intellectual disability terminology in non-disability-related contexts with negative connotations. This ableist terminology devalues people with intellectual disabilities. Dutch readers, with and without disabilities, will continue to be confronted with a bewildering array of terms and narratives pertaining to diverse representations of people with intellectual disabilities, from outdated and pejorative to positive and inclusive.

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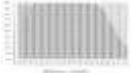





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	File	image/png, 127k
	Title	Figure 1: Percentages of articles with "feeble-minded," "mental," or "intellectual"
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References

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